



News from Congressman Tom Lantos

**12th Congressional District of California
San Mateo/San Francisco**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 17, 2003**

**FOR INFORMATION CALL
Lynne Weil (202) 225-6735**

Congressman Tom Lantos' Remarks on the 25th Anniversary of the Tragedy at Jonestown and the Death of Congressman Leo Ryan

Mr. Speaker, November 18th is the 25th anniversary of the massacre at Jonestown. A quarter century ago, more than 900 people lost their lives to the sick cause of a sociopath masquerading as a visionary.

Among the victims was Congressman Leo Ryan, the first Member of Congress ever killed in the line of duty. He was gunned down, along with four others of the delegation that he led to investigate reports of human rights abuses at a compound in the jungles of Guyana. Ten members of his group were wounded, some of them seriously, including California State Senator Jackie Speier, who was then a member of Congressman Ryan's staff.

In addition to those who died, thousands more were directly affected by the Jonestown tragedy: the grieving family members and friends of those who had misplaced their faith in the so-called Peoples Temple led by Jim Jones.

Mr. Speaker, survivors of that misguided movement, as well as relatives of Leo Ryan and of others who died, are gathering in Foster City, California, in a park that bears Congressman Ryan's name. They will consider his gifts and accomplishments as a public servant, and they will carry on with the struggle to make sense of the events that cut short his life and those of so many others.

Leo Ryan dedicated his life to protecting the oppressed. Elected to the California State Assembly in 1962, he was so moved by the conditions that led to the Watts Riots two years later that he volunteered as a substitute schoolteacher in Watts while the community rebuilt itself. This was typical of Leo Ryan: Confronted with a complex situation of social injustice, he insisted on getting his facts first-hand. In 1970, after hearing about abuses against convicts in California's top-security institutions, he spent a week undercover behind bars in Folsom Prison to see for himself how they were treated.

Mr. Speaker, this hands-on approach characterized Leo Ryan's work here in Congress, where he served on the Foreign Affairs Committee. In early 1978, concerns had been raised about U.S. citizens being held against their will in Guyana; stories were filtering out about beatings and forced rehearsals for mass suicides. When constituents brought the issue to Leo Ryan's attention, he took action.

There were warnings, but characteristically, Congressman Ryan was undeterred. He moved with caution, yet without trepidation, to organize a trip to Guyana. And to alert the world to what he expected to find, he brought along with him a handful of journalists, as well as members of the Concerned Relatives

group whose loved ones were in the thrall of Jim Jones. But after challenging Jones and confirming some of his concerns, Leo Ryan, three of the journalists and a defector from the Peoples Temple were to lose their lives on a jungle airstrip as the cataclysm at Jonestown began.

What lessons can be drawn from these experiences, Mr. Speaker? What can we conclude when we continue to see the rise of aberrant social groups that use violence to control their members, and are capable of unleashing brutality upon the world?

Jim Jones' methods of control mirror those of totalitarian leaders throughout history. He created a cult of personality centered on himself, demanded absolute obedience, isolated those who surrounded him from their former lives, and instilled in them a profound sense of paranoia about the outside world.

The Peoples Temple's members were manipulated to see in it whatever they wanted it to be. It was a self-help group for some, for others a religious movement, and for many it represented a new means to address society's shortcomings. Jim Jones also managed to legitimize the group among some conventional religious and political leaders by supporting their public events and contributing money to their causes during the years when the Peoples Temple was based in San Francisco.

How could so many people find themselves hoodwinked to varying degrees, letting themselves even be linked with this deviant community, much less joining its ranks and sacrificing their lives?

Mr. Speaker, it is a hard question to confront. And the Peoples Temple example teaches us most dramatically not to be seduced by easy answers. It is left to historians and specialists in mass psychology to piece together and place in context the puzzle of Jonestown, the rise of Fascism in Europe, and any number of other instances in which a twisted and charismatic individual has found ways to exploit the weaknesses of large groups and to destroy their will.

As John Ross Hall wrote in one of the definitive studies of Jonestown, *Gone From the Promised Land*, "We hear the screams, but we do not entirely understand them, and we will continue to wrestle with the apocalypse they unveiled."

And I would add, we will continue to commemorate the victims, and to pay tribute to their lives. Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask for a moment of silence here in this chamber to remember our fallen colleague, my predecessor representing the San Francisco Peninsula in Congress, Leo Ryan, and to honor his work for justice and human rights.

— # # # —